

They Could and Did

Tuesday, March 31, 2009 **FOX NEWS**

By Martin Hinton

"There is no education like adversity." — Disraeli

Benjamin Disraeli served as the United Kingdom's prime minister twice during the 1800s. His simple words have eternal and profound meaning.

We are judged by what we are able to conquer or overcome. World War II is a pristine example of this theory. At its onset America was not ready: not enough tanks, troops airplanes or bombs. That all changed, and quickly.

As so often is the case, people reacted first. Just days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the lines at some enlistment centers wrapped around the block. Other offices stayed open 24 hours a day in order to process the new recruits. But not all those who wanted to serve, could. The law prevented blacks from serving in most areas of the military.

This policy was based largely on a 1925 study conducted by the U.S. War College. The report claimed African-Americans were unable to perform technical tasks. It also questioned their ability to handle the stress of combat. As a result, most were assigned to cook or clean.

But just before Pearl Harbor, Congress had passed a law requiring the Army Air Corps to create an all-black fighter squadron. This training occurred in Tuskegee, Alabama, and the men who trained there became known as the Tuskegee Airmen.

It was no small task; in 1939 there were just 125 licensed black aviators. By the end of the war, thousands existed and their heroic performance was one reason President Harry S. Truman desegregated the U.S. military in 1948 — over 15 years before the 1964 Civil Rights Act made segregation in the civilian world illegal.

"What was once the worst organization in the world is probably now the leading organization for equality and integration and for equal treatment," recalls Tuskegee Airman Lee Archer.

With war's end millions of Americans came home to the victor's welcome they so deserved. But for the Tuskegee Airmen some things hadn't changed. Lee Archer left his ship and got a sucker punch to the gut. "When I came home from World War II, after having flown 169 combat missions, I came home and the first sign I ever saw at the foot of the gangplank said, 'Colored troops to the left, white troops to the right.' Separated again," remembered Archer.

It was a painful reminder that they had risked their lives for a country that didn't see them as whole citizens. But Archer takes the high ground: "You had to kind of balance it with all the good guys from the other side that you've met," he said. "And if you've got any reasoning power at all you realized that this is certain individuals, it's not a worldwide pain."

The civilian world of segregation led many of the Airmen to stay in the military. No one else would let them fly. Tuskegee Airman Charles Dryden recalls his decision: "My dream was always to be a pilot. Flying the best that Uncle Sam had."

As I traveled the country meeting these men, I was struck by their profound sense of mission. At any point they could have justifiably thrown their hands up in disgust and defeat at the way America treated them. But they didn't. They took this tiny opportunity to prove themselves deserving of equal opportunity and used it. Some proving that they were in fact superior to many in the population. They became fighter pilots for heaven's sake!

For Charles McGee it is all about keeping your eyes on the prize and turning everything life throws at you into a positive. If that isn't possible you cast it aside and press on.

"You can set a goal but you got to do some work, doing your best," said McGee. "Not letting obstacles deter you from accomplishing that goal. If you think negatively you're taking yourself out of a posture to do your best, because you are looking the wrong way. There is a good side to everything. And that's what you should see."

Wise words spoken by a man born into a country that considered him incapable and inferior. How wrong was our society? One of Charles McGee's last jobs in the Air Force was flying the supersonic fighter jet known as the F-4 Phantom. I'm happy to admit that he's more capable and superior than me.

— *Martin Hinton co-produced for "Red Tails: The Saga of the Tuskegee Airmen"*